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The paper for people who care about the West

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Former vermiculite miner and mill worker Les Skramstad is dying from exposure to asbestos. His wife, Norita, whose lung X-rays are shown here, is also infected.

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High Country News

Have Environmentalists Failed the West?

Soul-searching environmentalists fear they've become isolated and ineffective, but the story of Libby, Montana, and its dying residents, shows that the movement's missteps are only part of the story.

Page 8

BY RAY RING

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The story of an ailing town in northwestern Montana calls into question the health of the environmental movement

LIBBY, MONTANA

On a gray winter afternoon, 76-year-old Alice Priest has a blanket draped from her living-room ceiling to help contain the heat from the furnace. She's watching a rerun of the classic TV-Western, "Bonanza." Tubes snake from her nose to an oxygen bottle attached to her waist with a belt.

She's been hooked to the oxygen, day and night, for three years. "It's my companion," she says, patting the bottle. "I shower with it, I sleep with it, I wear it to the grocery store."

Priest is a victim of one of the nation's worst ongoing environmental and human-health disasters. She suffers from asbestosis, an incurable lung disease. About 1,500 people around Libby have similar ailments, caused by asbestos fibers lodged in their lungs and lung linings. More than 200 have already died from asbestos exposure, including Priest's husband and two members of her extended family.

Predicting her future, Priest says, "I'll probably die of no air."

The asbestos came from a vermiculite mine on nearby Zonolite Mountain, which operated from 1924 to 1990. Workers breathed in the deadly fibers while mining and processing the ore into insulation

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But the victims still struggle. They're trying to win compensation for the deaths, suffering and damages, as well as medical care and cleanup of the pollution that lingers in more than 1,200 homes. Meanwhile, the epidemic here continues to grow worse, because even a brief exposure to asbestos can cause illness decades later. Insurance experts estimate that each year for the next five years, about 60 more locals will die, and another 60 will be newly diagnosed with asbestos-related lung ailments.

The story is reminiscent of Love Canal, the Niagara Falls, N.Y., neighborhood built on a chemical waste dump; a health emergency there in the 1970s helped launch the environmental movement. But if you ask Alice Priest what role environmentalists have played in remedying Libby's problems, she answers flatly, "None."

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As unbelievable as that sounds, she's only slightly mistaken. And her summation yanks a high-level argument down to the ground: Some influential environmentalists charge that the environmental movement itself has become so isolated from the general public that it, too, is gasping for oxygen.

continued on page 10

Alice Priest is one of 1,500 Libby, Montana, residents who suffer from asbestos-related ailments. More than 200 town residents already have died from the diseases. RAY RING

Libby, Montana

continued from page 8

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—Carl Pope, Sierra Club director

"The signs of environmental-ism's death are all around us."

—Adam Werbach, former Sierra Club president

A bombshell

The debate over the health of the environmental movement ignited last October at the annual Environmental Grantmakers Association meeting in Hawaii. A couple of California provocateurs, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, dropped a bombshell of an essay on several hundred representatives of foundations that support environmental groups. The title of their 37-page essay: "The Death of Environmentalism."

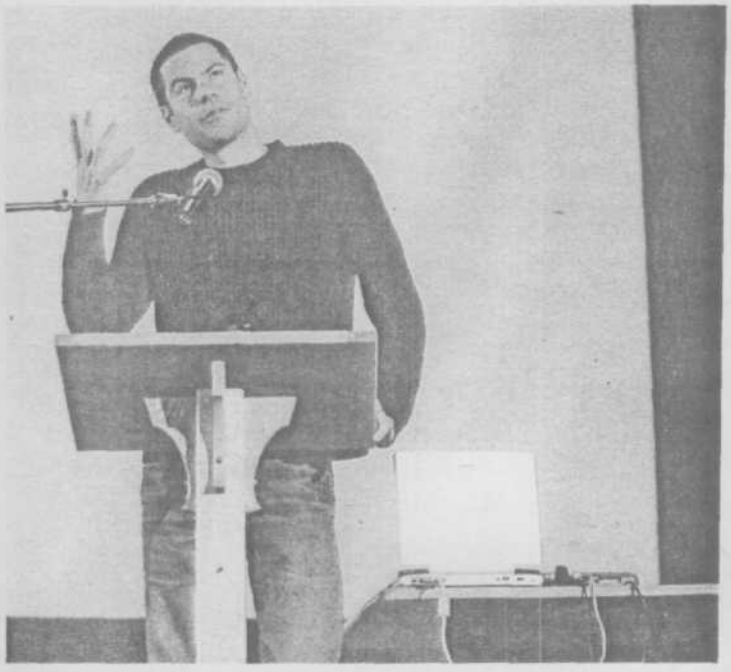
Based on interviews with a couple of dozen leading environmentalists, the essay charges that the movement has become narrow and self-interested, too focused on things like grizzly bears and wilderness to care about human needs. "Most of the movement's leading thinkers, funders and advocates do not question their most basic assumptions about who we are, what we stand for, and what it is that we should be doing," it says. "What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to rethink everything."

Shellenberger and Nordhaus have worked for a decade in campaigns on water, land-use planning and other issues. They use global warming to highlight what they see as the movement's failure, but their accusations apply to a wide range of issues.

They contend that the burst of lawmaking in the 1960s and '70s, to protect wilderness, endangered species, water and air quality, and forests and rangeland, "established a way of thinking about the environment and politics that has lasted until today. It was also then, at the height of the movement's success, that the seeds of failure were planted ... (The) success created a strong confidence — and in some cases bald arrogance — that the environmental protection frame was enough ..."

In other words, today's environmentalists identify a threat, arm themselves with science, and then use regulations and lawsuits to try to remedy the problem. But even when they're right, this strategy tends to alienate many people.

To be more effective, Shellenberger and Nordhaus say, environmentalists should think beyond preserving mountaintops and restoring black-footed ferrets, and reach out to more people by talking about "American values," such as jobs and families. There are groups that have tried this approach, but the essay's authors criticize the way in which they've done it. "The arrogance ... is that environmentalists ask not what we can do for non-environmental



Michael Shellenberger, left, speaks as Ted Nordhaus listens during their "The Death of Environmentalism" at a conference in Middlebury, Verm

Nathan Cummings Foundation, which funded their essay — cast it in the strongest terms. The essay also appeared at a crucial moment: Led by the Bush administration, the pro-business, anti-regulation movement has rolled back hundreds of environmental regulations and laws since the Republicans gained a majority in Congress in 2002 (*HCN,* 5/10/04). Environmentalists fought hard to defeat Bush in 2004, and his victory set many to soul-searching.

"I am deeply disappointed and angered" by the essay, says Sierra Club Director Carl Pope in a lengthy response posted on his group's Web site. Pope calls the essay, "rubbish ... unfair, unclear and divisive," and argues that "environmentalism is a broad, diverse and robust movement."

Yet even Pope acknowledges that "Shellenberger and Nordhaus are ... correct when they say that environmentalism is falling short because it shares with the rest of the progressive movement a set of increasingly outmoded organizing, advocacy and political approaches."

A few other prominent environmental leaders, including former Sierra Club President Adam Werbach, have lined up closely with Shellenberger and Nordhaus. "The signs of environmentalism's death are all around us," Werbach charged in a speech to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club in December. "We speak in terms of technical problems, not vision and values ... we are failing to attract young people ... we are failing to attract the disenfranchised, the disempowered, the dispossessed and the disengaged ... The sooner we acknowledge (environmentalism's) death,

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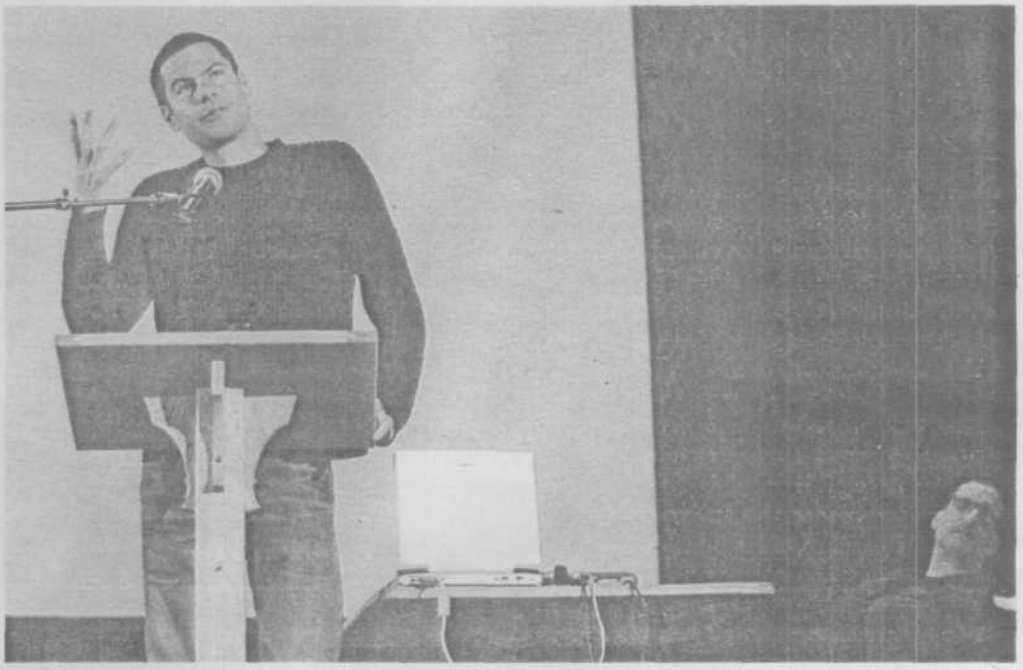

Michael Shellenberger, left, speaks as Ted Nordhaus listens during their presentation of their paper "The Death of Environmentalism" at a conference in Middlebury, Vermont. AP WIDE WORLD PHOTO

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A few other prominent environmental leaders, including former Sierra Club President Adam Werbach, have lined up closely with Shellenberger and Nordhaus. "The signs of environmentalism's death are all around us," Werbach charged in a speech to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club in December. "We speak in terms of technical problems, not vision and values ... we are failing to attract young people ... we are failing to attract the disenfranchised, the disempowered, the dispossessed and the disengaged ... The sooner we acknowledge (environmentalism's) death,

rounding countryside of Lincoln County have seen fierce environmental battles in recent decades. Some might say that environmentalists have done a lot of good for the land, while leaving the people in the dust. But it has always been much more complicated than that.

The mountains in this remote northwest corner of Montana wear thick forests, laced by rivers and mineral veins. So three major natural-resource industries converged here: logging, mining and dam-building (*see timeline, page 12*).

For a while, the locals didn't seem to see any contradiction between these industries and protecting the environment. From 1911 to 1957, a conservation-minded family owned several hundred thousand acres of private timberland and managed it for "sustained yield." From the 1950s to the '70s, Libby sent a working-class Democrat, Art Shelden, to the state Legislature. Shelden made his living in the logging camps and mills, and in the Legislature, he helped pass laws that protected Montana's land, wildlife and water (*HCN*, 12/17/01).

Over time, though, the industries began to take more than the land could sustain. Big corporations — St. Regis Paper Co., then Champion International — snapped up the private timberland, and then, pressured by stockholders, they overcut the big old-growth trees to maximize short-term profits. As the harvest on private land peaked and inevitably declined, sawmills needed more from the 2.2 million-acre Kootenai National Forest. During the 1980s, the forest began to resemble a fishing net: many clear-cuts, with strands of

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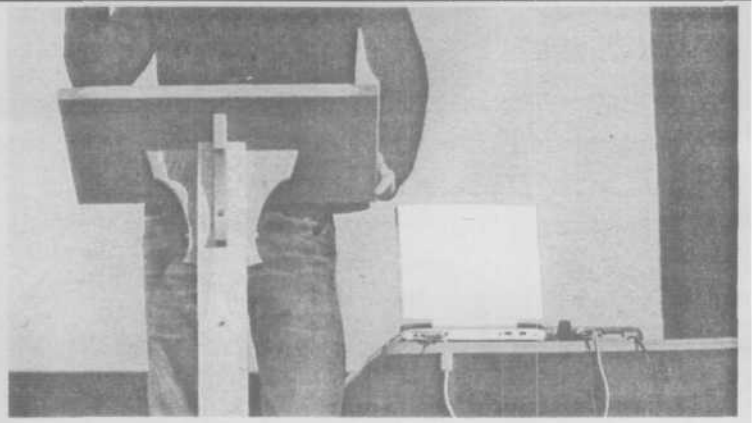
Others have lofted similar criticism over the years, but Shellenberger and Nordhaus — and the New York-based Nathan Cummings Foundation, which funded their essay — cast it in the strongest terms. The essay also appeared at a crucial moment: Led by the Bush administration, the pro-business, anti-regulation movement has rolled back hundreds of environmental regulations and laws since the Republicans gained a majority in Congress in 2002 (*HCN*, 5/10/04). Environmentalists fought hard to defeat Bush in 2004, and his victory set many to soul-searching.



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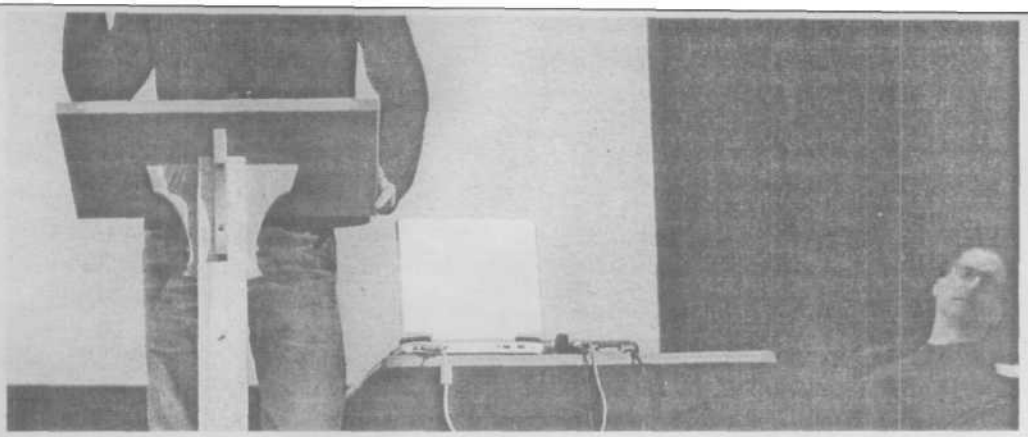

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The mountains in this remote northwest corner of Montana wear thick forests, laced by rivers and mineral veins. So three major natural-resource industries converged here: logging, mining and dam-building (*see timeline, page 12*).

For a while, the locals didn't seem to see any contradiction between these industries and protecting the environment. From 1911 to 1957, a conservation-minded family owned several hundred thousand acres of private timberland and managed it for "sustained yield." From the 1950s to the '70s, Libby sent a working-class Democrat, Art Shelden, to the state Legislature. Shelden made his living in the logging camps and mills, and in the Legislature, he helped pass laws that protected Montana's land, wildlife and water (*HCN*, 12/17/01).

Over time, though, the industries began to take more than the land could sustain. Big corporations — St. Regis Paper Co., then Champion International — snapped up the private timberland, and then, pressured by stockholders, they overcut the big old-growth trees to maximize short-term profits. As the harvest on private land peaked and inevitably declined, sawmills needed more from the 2.2 million-acre Kootenai National Forest. During the 1980s, the forest began to resemble a fishing net: many clear-cuts, with strands of trees in between. Around the same time, power companies proposed two new dams on the Kootenai River, which was already backed up 90 miles behind Libby Dam. And mining companies began digging on the fringes of the 90,000-acre Cabinet Mountains Wilderness Area, polluting at least one stream and threatening others.

Local environmentalists, working with groups based in Missoula and Spokane, unleashed a barrage of appeals and lawsuits to protect the dwindling old-growth forests and pristine streams — habitat for rare wildlife, including grizzly bears, lynx, bull trout, bald eagles and pileated woodpeckers. They stopped the two proposed dams, and delayed some of the risky mine proposals for many years. Their legal work coincided with insect outbreaks and wildfires, and by the mid-1990s, the Kootenai National Forest's harvest was down by 75 percent.

That current of change coincided with another: As in the rest of the rural West, Libby's economy slowly went bust, from the 1980s on, largely because of global competition and the failure to use resources wisely. And as in the rest of the rural West, most locals blamed environmentalists, viewing them as outsiders who destroyed local jobs.

Even environmentalists with roots in the community were pushed to the margin. Bill Martin, for example, is a Vietnam vet who moved from the San Francisco area to a rustic homestead west of Libby in 1976. Since then, he's worked as a tree-planter and stonemason. He founded the Cabinet Resource Group, a leading local environmental group, shortly after moving in. The group is as grassroots as they come, with membership hovering between 100 and 200 people, and not a single paid staffer.

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The environmentalists triggered a "cultural instability," says Charles Clark, a visiting assistant professor of sociology at Whitman College in Washington. He was part of the back-to-the-land movement around Libby in the 1980s, and returned in the 1990s to study the conflict. In a 2001 report in the journal *Human Ecology Review*, he observed, "As the scientific validity of the environmental claims mounted, loggers rejected science as an appropriate field of struggle, and organized around moral and community solidarity." The loggers cast the debate in terms of the good guys versus the bad guys.

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Plenty of blame to spread around

People in Libby began to get sick and die from the asbestos in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the victims and their kin were hiring lawyers to sue W.R. Grace. The dimensions of the local disaster were still not clear, but asbestos pollution had already

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Local leaders, too, lacked foresight. Cabinet Resource Group's Martin recalls making a presentation to a Libby Chamber of Commerce committee in the late 1970s, asking for a study of possible "wild and scenic" status for the Kootenai River. He told the business leaders it would bring increased tourism and other economic benefits. "They wouldn't listen," Martin says. "They were prejudiced against me. They were fearful and hostile, because I was threatening the status quo."

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Gayla Benefield, whose extended family has more than 30 members either ailing or dead from asbestos exposure, was a staunch opponent of environmentalists during the battles over damming the river. She led a pro-dam campaign symbolized by a bumper sticker that said, "Pave the Kootenai." When the asbestos epidemic began, "People like Gayla Benefield saw environmentalists as their sworn enemies, so they didn't contact (any environmental group)," says Martin.

In fact, environmentalists have repeatedly tried to reach across the divide, and have mostly been rejected. The biggest attempt came in 1990, when the local chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association and the timber unions evaluated the Kootenai National Forest acre by acre. They hammered out a deal, called the Kootenai Accord, splitting the remnants of roadless old-growth forest between them. "People were hungry for resolution," says the Wilderness Association's John Gatchell.

But then an industry group, Western Environmental Trade Association, hired an organizer to "undermine support" for the Accord, Gatchell says. "It got very ugly — fearmongering." The organizer warned in a public meeting in Libby that the Accord would kill jobs, "and along with that comes wife battering (and) child molestation ... Do you think that environmentalists ... give a damn about the fact that kids are going to be molested as a result of this?"

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Buildup to disaster: A Libby timeline

ASBESTOS

1860s

1860s Mining begins

1916 In an old mine shaft about seven miles from Libby, prospector Edgar Alley notices his candle causing a strange rock to expand; he's discovered veins of vermiculite, which contains tremolite asbestos.

1939 Universal Zonolite Company takes over the vermiculite mine, processing the ore into insulation for buildings around the nation.

1956 A state inspector takes air samples in the vermiculite mine and processing mill, and finds that "the asbestos in the air is of considerable toxicity."

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Electron micrograph of asbestos fiber from a site near Libby. EPA

1960s Workers handling the vermiculite begin to come down with asbestos-related illnesses.

1963 Multinational conglomerate W.R. Grace & Co. takes over the vermiculite operation. Over time, the company improves working conditions to reduce the asbestos risk, but allows the exposure of workers and families to continue.

1980s The Environmental Protection Agency conducts four studies that show the dangers of asbestos in Libby, but keeps them quiet.

Mid-1980s Ralph Nader's *Public Citizen* magazine and Montana newspapers report on asbestos-related illness in Libby and victim lawsuits against W.R. Grace. The national press ignores the story.

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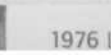

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Environmentalists were demonized. The opposition forced the Accord to a countywide vote, and voters rejected the deal overwhelmingly. "The people that derailed it have never put forth anything to resolve anything, they just want to throw rocks," Gatchell says.

So a stubborn rural culture, prodded by industry, aided in Libby's demise by keeping the community divided and preventing people from working together on common concerns.

"There are complex reasons for the (economic) shutdowns, but it's real easy just to blame the environmentalists," says Eileen Carney, a teacher who represented Libby in the Montana House of Representatives from 2000 to 2004. "Then you don't have to think anymore."

Small, quiet progress

The criticism in "The Death of Environmentalism" has struck a chord with some of the environmentalists who've been active in Libby.

"I agree with the thesis that the environmental movement has become alienated and isolated, and that it's lost its power to influence people," says Tom Platt, who was director of the Missoula-based Ecology Center in 2002 and 2003. The Ecology Center is "a litigation shop," in Platt's words — it's been a plaintiff in more than 30 lawsuits against national forests in Montana and Idaho since 1990. Platt was in the Ecology Center's office in 2003 when Lincoln County leaders arrived in a schoolbus to ask for relief from a lawsuit that was tying up salvage timber sales on the Kootenai National Forest. The Ecology Center's board of directors and another plaintiff in that suit, the Lands Council in Spokane, refused to back off, Platt says, and he left the group shortly after that.

Too often, Platt says, "Environmentalism is played as a zero-sum game," in which one side loses as much as the other

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1999 Tipped by Montana environmentalists and lawyers, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* makes the Libby asbestos disaster a national story, forcing the EPA to dispatch a cleanup team.

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The timber industry, for example, blamed environmentalists for Libby's hard times. But corporate maneuvering and the volatile markets for wood and minerals played a much larger part. The timber corporations simply consumed too much old-growth, and they failed to invest in new sawmill technology that could have handled smaller logs and kept the mills running when big old logs grew scarce. W.R. Grace also helped kill the local timber economy: In 2002, the last sawmill in Libby closed because the asbestos epidemic spread into the sawmill families, and the sawmill company couldn't afford the skyrocketing cost of health insurance. Another corporate giant, Plum Creek Timber Company, has acquired the private timberland, and it hauls most of the local harvest off to its mills in another county.

Local leaders, too, lacked foresight. Cabinet Resource Group's Martin recalls making a presentation to a Libby Chamber of Commerce committee in the late 1970s, asking for a study of possible "wild and scenic" status for the Kootenai River. He told the business leaders it would bring increased tourism and other economic benefits. "They wouldn't listen," Martin says. "They were prejudiced against me. They were fearful and hostile, because I was threatening the status quo."

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Gayla Benefield, whose extended family has more than 30 members either ailing or dead from asbestos exposure, was a staunch opponent of environmentalists during the battles over damming the river. She led a pro-dam campaign symbolized by a bumper sticker that said, "Pave the Kootenai." When the asbestos epidemic began, "People like Gayla Benefield saw environmentalists as their sworn enemies, so they didn't contact (any environmental group)," says Martin.

In fact, environmentalists have repeatedly tried to reach across the divide, and have mostly been rejected. The biggest attempt came in 1990, when the local chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association and the timber unions evaluated the Kootenai National Forest acre by acre. They hammered out a deal, called the Kootenai Accord, splitting the remnants of roadless old-growth forest between them. "People were hungry for resolution," says the Wilderness Association's John Gatchell.

But then an industry group, Western Environmental Trade Association, hired an organizer to "undermine support" for the Accord, Gatchell says. "It got very ugly — fearmongering." The organizer warned in a public meeting in Libby that the Accord would kill jobs, "and along with that comes wife battering (and) child molestation ... Do you think that environmentalists ... give a damn about the fact that kids are going to be molested as a result of this?"

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Buildup to disaster: A Libby timeline

ASBESTOS

1916 In an old mine shaft about seven miles from Libby, prospector Edgar Alley notices his candle causing a strange rock to expand; he's discovered veins of vermiculite, which contains tremolite asbestos.

1939 Universal Zonolite Company takes over the vermiculite mine, processing the ore into insulation for buildings around the nation.

1956 A state inspector takes air samples in the vermiculite mine and processing mill, and finds that "the asbestos in the air is of considerable toxicity."

Electron micrograph of asbestos fiber from a site near Libby. EPA

1960s Workers handling the vermiculite begin to come down with asbestos-related illnesses.

1963 Multinational conglomerate W.R. Grace & Co. takes over the vermiculite operation. Over time, the company improves working conditions to reduce the asbestos risk, but allows the exposure of workers and families to continue.

1980s The Environmental Protection Agency conducts four studies that show the dangers of asbestos in Libby, but keeps them quiet.

Mid-1980s Ralph Nader's *Public Citizen* magazine and Montana newspapers report on asbestos-related illness in Libby and victim lawsuits against W.R. Grace. The national press ignores the story.

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LOGGING AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

1860s

Gold panning in 1860s Montana. Western History / Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library

1860s Mining begins with gold rushes on banks of Libby Creek.

1911 Family-owned J. Neils Lumber Co. relocates from Minnesota to Libby, buying sawmills and, eventually, several hundred thousand acres of timberland.

1957 J. Neils sells out to the giant St. Regis Paper Co., which later builds more sawmills.

1960s Libby's economy booms, employing more than 1,300 in logging and about 2,000 in constructing the Libby Dam.

Libby parade, circa 1950s. Libby Heritage Museum

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Libby's problems — not only W.R. Grace & Co., but also many government agencies, including the EPA and the U.S. Forest Service, other industries, and the community's own leaders.

The timber industry, for example, blamed environmentalists for Libby's hard times. But corporate maneuvering and the volatile markets for wood and minerals played a much larger part. The timber corporations simply consumed too much old-growth, and they failed to invest in new sawmill technology that could have handled smaller logs and kept the mills running when big old logs grew scarce. W.R. Grace also helped kill the local timber economy: In 2002, the last sawmill in Libby closed because the asbestos epidemic spread into the sawmill families, and the sawmill company couldn't afford the skyrocketing cost of health insurance. Another corporate giant, Plum Creek Timber Company, has acquired the private timberland, and it hauls most of the local harvest off to its mills in another county.

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ing the community divided and preventing people from working together on common concerns.

"There are complex reasons for the (economic) shutdowns, but it's real easy just to blame the environmentalists," says Eileen Carney, a teacher who represented Libby in the Montana House of Representatives from 2000 to 2004. "Then you don't have to think anymore."

Small, quiet progress

The criticism in "The Death of Environmentalism" has struck a chord with some of the environmentalists who've been active in Libby.

"I agree with the thesis that the environmental movement has become alienated and isolated, and that it's lost its power to influence people," says Tom Platt, who was director of the Missoula-based Ecology Center in 2002 and 2003. The Ecology Center is "a litigation shop," in Platt's words — it's been a plaintiff in more than 30 lawsuits against national forests in Montana and Idaho since 1990. Platt was in the Ecology Center's office in 2003 when Lincoln County leaders arrived in a schoolbus to ask for relief from a lawsuit that was tying up salvage timber sales on the Kootenai National Forest. The Ecology Center's board of directors and another plaintiff in that suit, the Lands Council in Spokane, refused to back off, Platt says, and he left the group shortly after that.

Too often, Platt says, "Environmentalism is played as a zero-sum game," in which one side loses as much as the other

saster: A Libby timeline

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1989 EPA bans most uses of asbestos nationwide.

1990 W.R. Grace & Co. closes its Libby vermiculite operations.

1991 Ruling on an industry lawsuit, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals tosses out the EPA's asbestos ban, saying the EPA's cost-benefit analysis is flawed. The George H.W. Bush administration lets the issue drop.

1999 Tipped by Montana environmentalists and lawyers, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* makes the Libby asbestos disaster a national story, forcing the EPA to dispatch a cleanup team.

1860s Mining begins with gold rushes on banks of Libby Creek.

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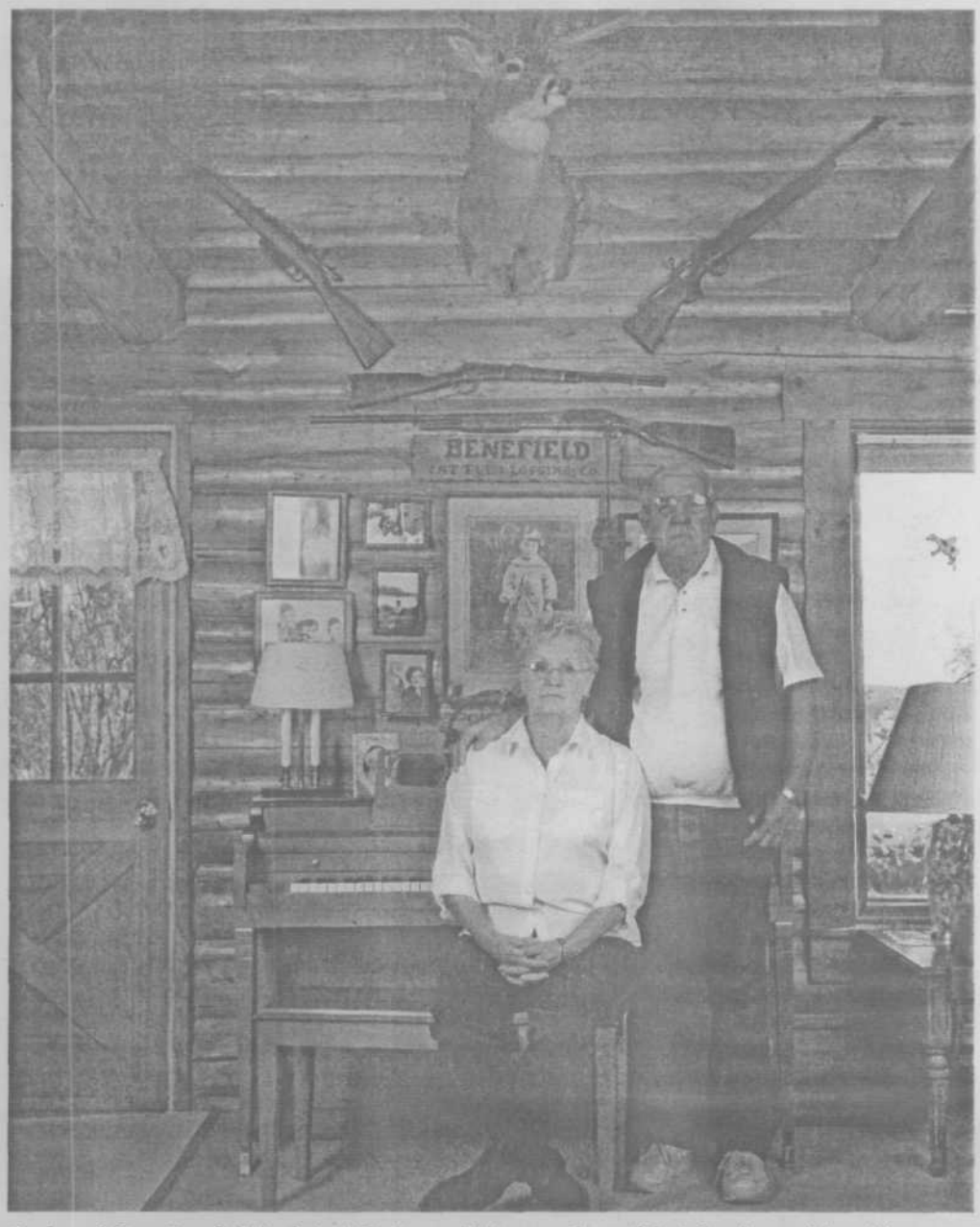
Libby parade, circa 1950s. Libby Heritage Museum

1976 Local environmentalists organize the Cabinet Resource Group to fight risky mining proposals. Over time, environmentalists oppose heavy-handed logging and stop two additional dams.

1984 St. Regis Paper Co. merges with Champion International, which liquidates old growth on the private timberland for short-term profits.

1987 Kootenai National Forest logging peaks at 250 million board-feet per year.



Gayla and Dave Benefield in their Libby home. Thirty members of their family are either ailing or dead from exposure to asbestos. BRAD DECECCO, WWW.BRADDECECCO.COM

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Jensen points to the tremendous suc cesses that Montana's environmentalist notched up in last November's statewide elections: Voters upheld a ban on cyanid process gold mining and retained a gree leaning Montana Supreme Court judge. They also installed a pro-environmental Democrat in the governor's office and Democratic majorities in both chambers the Legislature (*HCN,* 11/22/04).

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Some local groups are trying to mend fences. The Yaak Valley Forest Council, example, organized in 1997 to try to protect 180,000 acres of the old-growth remnants, then expanded its mission. It has initiated two projects for forest stewardship and watershed restoration, creating few jobs and a modest flow of small-diam ter trees. "We're showing that you can be for wildland protection and still be for some logging," says Robyn King, the Yaa group's only full-time staffer. That group

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An EPA worker enters a sealed Libby home. Brian Plonka / The Spokesman-Review

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2003 Federal Judge Don Molloy in Missoula orders W.R. Grace & Co. to pay $54.5 million to help cover the cost of the Libby cleanup. The company has appealed that verdict.

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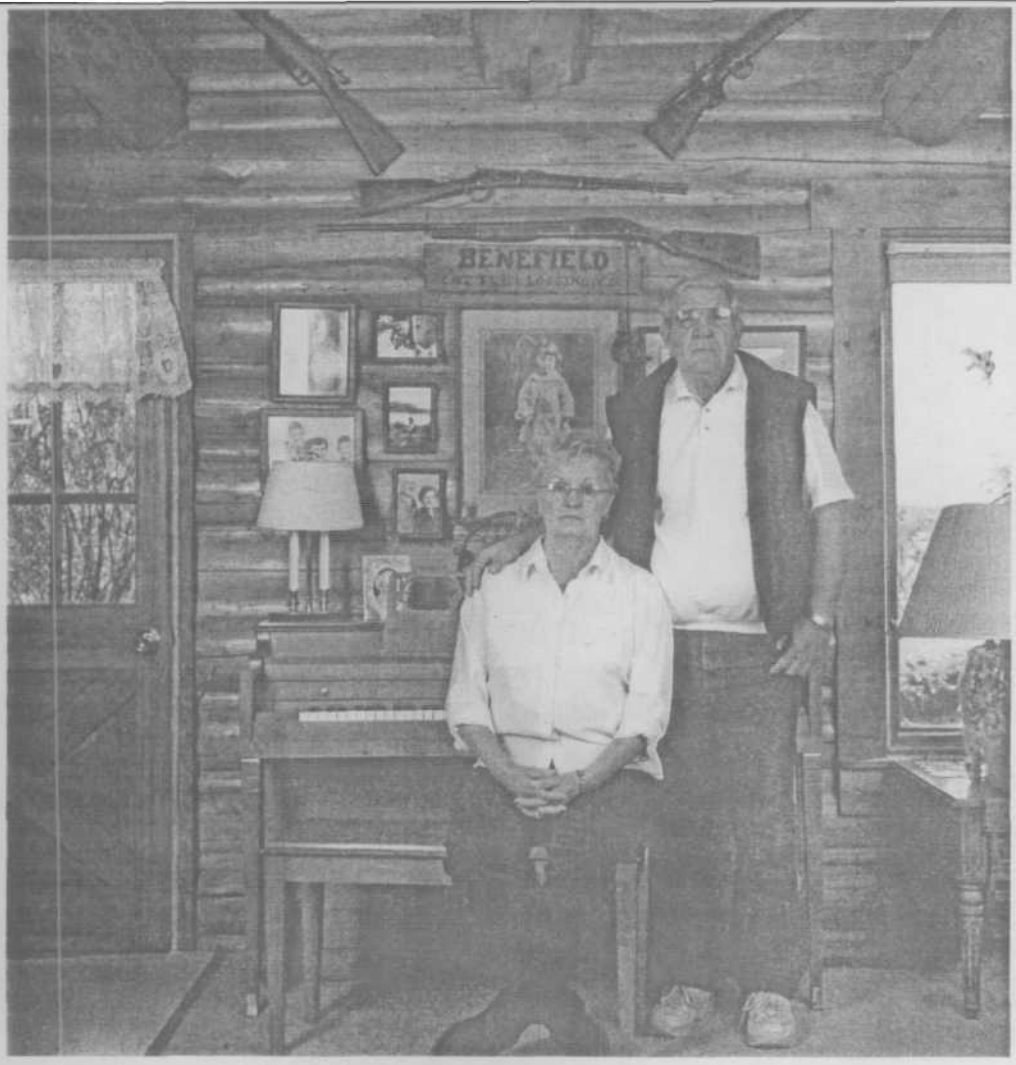

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1990s Environmentalists' appeals and lawsuits, as well as insect outbreaks and wildfires, cause the Forest Service to reduce the timber cut in the Kootenai National Forest by more than 75 percent, to about 60 million board-feet per year.

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2005 Jim Hurst, owner of Lincoln County's biggest remaining sawmill, in Eureka, announces that he'll shut down in May, laying off 90 people. He blames environmentalists for "obstructing" logging on the national forest.

Libby, Montana

continued from page 13

as well as the Sierra Club's Missoula chapter and some other groups, has also met with the managers and owners of some sawmills in western Montana, trying to figure out how to keep the mills in business and the forests healthy.

Hard-liners can change, given enough battle scars. Gayla Benefield's family worked in logging as well as dam-building and vermiculite mining, and now she reflects, "When environmentalists started showing up in Libby in the 1970s, they tried to shove it down our throats. We were all offended by (them) telling us how to take care of our own area. But they were right."

That kind of progress, though, comes one person at a time. Meanwhile, the wars continue loudly. At the moment, at least five environmental groups are pressing another lawsuit against logging on the Kootenai National Forest, over grizzly bear issues. Other lawsuits challenge three questionable mine proposals.

Jim Hurst runs the biggest sawmill left in Lincoln County, located in Eureka. He got into the business working in his father's sawmill when he was a kid. He's invested in new technology to turn the small-diameter trees into 1-inch-by-3-inch lumber that he sells to Hollywood movie sets. But he had to lay off half his crew because he's had trouble finding enough trees, due to lawsuits, regulations and cut-throat competition from bigger mills outside the county. Recently he announced he'll shut down completely in May, laying off the rest of his crew, 90 people. Rightly or wrongly, when the *Missoulian* covered his shutdown in a prominent story, he made the familiar charge: "The environmental obstructionists took our jobs."

Missed opportunities

The cultural divide in Libby continues to gape like the Grand Canyon. And the heavy lifting in the asbestos disaster continues to be done by the victims, their lawyers, journalists, and the EPA, with spurring from Montana Sen. Max Baucus, D. "It's a struggle every step of the way," says Benefield, who now heads the Lincoln County Asbestos Victims Relief Organization, which pushes for compensation and cleanup.

The EPA has so little funding that it can clean up only about 130 houses per year, about half the original goal. House by house, the crews measure asbestos levels in the air, attic insulation, walls, carpets, and soil, and determine what needs to be done. Some victims believe that houses

After a parade, Libby residents, many of whom suffer from asbestosis, are wheeled back to the seni center. CHAD HARDER

company has appealed the verdict. W.R. Grace also declared bankruptcy in 2001, trying to insulate itself from the lawsuits and other claims. The company is expected to shell out about $10 million for medical coverage for the Libby victims over the next five years, but that's less than one-third of what's needed; the rest is being covered by Medicare, Medicaid, the local hospital's charity program, and the victims' own wallets and insurance policies.

The victims got a small dose of satisfaction on Feb. 7, when a federal grand jury indicted W.R. Grace, and seven current or former executives, on criminal conspiracy charges, alleging they knowingly exposed people to the lethal asbestos. The struggle even extends to Congress, where Republicans have pushed a series of bills trying to exempt asbestos and insurance companies from 600,000 pending lawsuits. (The companies have already settled an estimated 500,000 lawsuits, filed primarily by victims of chrysotile asbestos.)

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., introduced the latest bill, called the Fairness in Asbestos Injury Resolution Act, in the last week of January. If it passes, the companies would put $140 billion into a special fund, which would pay medical bills until the money runs out. From then on, the companies would be immune from lawsuits, no matter how many new victims are diagnosed. There would be no compensation for emotional loss and other damages.

More than 70 percent of the Libby victims wouldn't be covered by that legisla-

based Environmental Working Group Action Fund, is lobbying against the bill: The group only got involved in 2003, wit funding from the trial lawyers, accordin to Senior Vice President Richard Wiles.

"The environmental community sort gave up on asbestos," when the EPA's ba didn't stick, Wiles says. The nation's tot asbestos use has dropped dramatically since the 1970s, Wiles says, but vermicu lite insulation lingers in at least 15 milli homes, and millions of car mechanics sti handle asbestos-laced brake shoes impor ed from other countries. Federal studies show that more than 10,000 Americans each year from past and ongoing asbesto exposure, Wiles says, yet "no other envi- ronmental group is working on it."

And that also points to a shortfall in the environmental movement, says Wile "The way you're going to motivate (the public) is when you talk about threats to human health. It's the grand unifying theme," he says. "It's certainly a legitim reason to care, and if humans are hurt, you can presume the environment is tak ing a beating — we're part of it."

Pat Williams, who represented Montana in Congress from 1979 to 1997, and is now with the Center for the Rock Mountain West, sums up why environm talists haven't gone all out to help in the Libby disaster: "No environmental grou saw it as their responsibility or as an opportunity."

The key word is "opportunity." It was an opportunity to bridge the divide, over

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Lincoln County Asbestos Victims Relief Organization Gayla Benefield, 406-293-5535

ure out how to keep the mills in business and the forests healthy.

Hard-liners can change, given enough battle scars. Gayla Benefield's family worked in logging as well as dam-building and vermiculite mining, and now she reflects, "When environmentalists started showing up in Libby in the 1970s, they tried to shove it down our throats. We were all offended by (them) telling us how to take care of our own area. But they were right."

That kind of progress, though, comes one person at a time. Meanwhile, the wars continue loudly. At the moment, at least five environmental groups are pressing another lawsuit against logging on the Kootenai National Forest, over grizzly bear issues. Other lawsuits challenge three questionable mine proposals.

Jim Hurst runs the biggest sawmill left in Lincoln County, located in Eureka. He got into the business working in his father's sawmill when he was a kid. He's invested in new technology to turn the small-diameter trees into 1-inch-by-3-inch lumber that he sells to Hollywood movie sets. But he had to lay off half his crew because he's had trouble finding enough trees, due to lawsuits, regulations and cut-throat competition from bigger mills outside the county. Recently he announced he'll shut down completely in May, laying off the rest of his crew, 90 people. Rightly or wrongly, when the *Missoulian* covered his shutdown in a prominent story, he made the familiar charge: "The environmental obstructionists took our jobs."

Missed opportunities

The cultural divide in Libby continues to gape like the Grand Canyon. And the heavy lifting in the asbestos disaster continues to be done by the victims, their lawyers, journalists, and the EPA, with spurring from Montana Sen. Max Baucus, D. "It's a struggle every step of the way," says Benefield, who now heads the Lincoln County Asbestos Victims Relief Organization, which pushes for compensation and cleanup.

The EPA has so little funding that it can clean up only about 130 houses per year, about half the original goal. House by house, the crews measure asbestos levels in the air, attic insulation, walls, carpets, and soil, and determine what needs to be done. Some victims believe that houses declared clean are still dangerous, because some asbestos fibers always linger. "They're simply not getting it all," Benefield says.

The EPA won a federal court ruling that W.R. Grace should pay $54.5 million of the cleanup's cost, but the total cost will likely run three times that much, and the company has appealed the verdict. W.R. Grace also declared bankruptcy in 2001, trying to insulate itself from the lawsuits and other claims. The company is expected to shell out about $10 million for medical coverage for the Libby victims over the next five years, but that's less than one-third of what's needed; the rest is being covered by Medicare, Medicaid, the local hospital's charity program, and the victims' own wallets and insurance policies.

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Yaak Valley Forest Council in Yaak, Mont., Robyn King, 406-295-9736

Cabinet Resource Group in Troy, Mont., Bill Martin, 406-295-5258

Montana Environmental Information Center in Helena, 406-443-2520 or www.meic.org